

## The military role of the Numidians in the Punic Wars (264-202 BC)

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### Abstract:

The Numid played an important political and military role in the ancient Maghreb, and this was quickly realized by both the Carthaginians and the Romans, so each raced to ally with them at times, while other periods witnessed a state of collision, so the military role, especially in the conflicts that occurred between Rome, Carthage and the Romans, What is known as the Punic Wars and conflict with each other is prominent and that after the emergence of the Numidian kingdoms at the end of the third century BC with military leaders such as Massinissa and Sfax, who changed the balance of power between Carthage and Rome, making them vulnerable to divisions and conflicts among them, and they had a negative and sometimes positive impact on the battles of the third century BC.

**Keywords:** Military, Numidians, Carthage, War, Masinissa

### 1.Introduction:

The Numidians had a strong influence on the political, social, economic and military life of Carthage in the third century BC, especially militarily in light of its conflict with Rome, where the Carthaginian state resorted to the Numidians early on since their ancestors, and the Libyans stood by its side in its wars against the Greeks. as Herodotus noted in the Battle of Himera in 480 BC. Local participation in the Carthaginian armies increased significantly after Carthage adopted a different policy in North Africa, based on subjugating the local population. In this context, we are faced with the main question: What military role did the Numidians play before the end of the third

century BC? A series of questions collectively form the central issues on which our topic is based:

What was the situation of the Numidians before their contact with the Carthaginians? What was their relationship with the Carthaginian army? What was the military status of the Numidians in the First Punic War (246-241 BC) and the Second Punic War (218-202 BC)? What was their relationship with the mercenary revolt after the end of the First Punic War? One of the objectives of this research is to learn about our glorious history in ancient times.

To answer these questions, it was necessary to employ a historical approach.

### 2. The Numidians:

They were the indigenous people of ancient Morocco, neighbours of the Carthaginian Empire, which was founded in 814 BC and fell in 146 BC. The empire had influence in ancient Morocco and lasted for about a thousand years (Gautier, 2010, p. 21). The Numidians lived between the Moors and Carthage in the interior of ancient Morocco. The Greeks and Romans derived the meaning of Numidians from shepherds, referring to their daily lifestyle of nomads and travellers, although in reality there were no fundamental differences between the societies of North Africa (Mehran, 1990, p. 191).

### 3. The situation of the Numidians prior to military cooperation and conflict with Carthage:

At the beginning of the 12th century BC, the Phoenicians began to expand towards the western Mediterranean. Muhammad al-Saghir Ghanem divides the Phoenician presence into

two phases: the first from the founding of Carthage until the 5th century BC, and the second from the end of the first phase until the fall of Carthage (146 BC) (Ghanem, *Phoenician Expansion in the Western Mediterranean*, 1979, p. 88). Researcher Muhammad al-Hadi Harish also spoke of two phases in the expansion towards the west: the phase of exploration and discovery, and the phase of settlement and exploitation (Harish, *Ancient Maghreb History*, 1992, p. 42). During the exploration phase, they established the settlement of Utica in 1110 BC, as well as other settlements on the Mediterranean coast. During the settlement phase, they founded the city of Carthage, whose name means 'new city' in Phoenician. Carthage was founded in 814 BC by Princess Elissa, who came from the Phoenician city of Tyre (Miadan, 1981, p. 37). Since its founding, Carthage gradually grew from century to century, developing in various fields, especially in the economic and commercial spheres. It became one of the major trading states of its time, establishing political, economic and social relations with the local population and founding settlements on its northern coast, numbering around 300 stations (Ghanem, *Phoenician Expansion in the Western Mediterranean*, 1979, p. 96).

To protect its vital and economic interests, commercial competition, and conflicting interests between major powers, the Carthaginian state entered into several military confrontations since its inception. In the early centuries after its founding, it clashed with the Greek Empire, which preferred to enter into wars with it in order to annex Sicily. It then fought wars with the Romans in Sicily and . These long wars ended with the destruction of their capital, Carthage, which fell in 146 BC. Those who follow the history of Carthage will note that it changed its domestic and foreign policy in the fifth century BC after a series of defeats and calamities, especially after the defeat of Himera (480 BC) against the Greeks, when Carthage finally turned towards Africa (Al-Mahasin, 1981, p. 78) and expanded at the expense of the local population from the beginning of the second half of the fifth century BC. It began recruiting Africans into

its armies and distributing African lands to the aristocracy. Some believe that Carthage's relationship with Africans began with the defeat of Himera, which marked a temporary decline in Carthage's influence in Sicily. This decline was behind Carthage's intensified efforts to establish a new sphere of influence at the expense of the Libyans neighbouring Carthage and the Numidians (Ghanem, *The Numidian Kingdom and Numidian Civilisation*, 2006, p. 86). This expansionist tendency, resulting from a policy of subjugation, was met by the locals with revolts, disobedience and alliances with the enemy. This is what some historians have mentioned in relation to the Carthaginian campaigns in Sicily, as well as after the First and Second Punic Wars, due to the Carthaginian armies' inability to control the battles, as they realised the strength and bravery of the Numidians in war (Akseil, 2007, p. 357).

Most ancient historians mention that the Numidians were strong and healthy, resistant to fatigue, and that most of them died of old age, and few were killed by disease. These were among the most important reasons why Carthage recruited them into its armies, and thus they became the backbone of the Carthaginian army, most notably the cavalry. Military service was also offered to them if they were followers of Carthage. The local population proved their ferocity in many locations and battles, examples of which include Hannibal's battles in Italy, among them the Battle of Cannae. Historical sources also point to the importance of the local element in successive Carthaginian armies, with some ancient historians mentioning that they were fierce warriors. Despite the role these recruits played in defending Carthage and protecting its interests, they also posed a threat to it, as was the case in the mercenary revolt when they rebelled against Carthage (Nasrat, p. 301).

#### **4. Military organisation of the Numidians:**

The first signs of military organisation among the local population of ancient Morocco appeared with the arrival of the Phoenicians, led by Princess Alissa, who was forced to accept the conditions imposed by the local leader because she had no military force to

protect her. After the founding of Carthage, the local population was militarily integrated into this new state in various ways, until they became a major part of the Carthaginian army. (Al-Mashrafi, 1969, p. 49)

#### **5. The Numidians in the Carthaginian army:**

Some historians mention that the Carthaginian army was greatly lacking in manpower after Carthage became a regional power in the Mediterranean basin. This state began to rely heavily on foreign nationals, including the local population of North Africa, until the army came to be composed of different religions and languages, with each soldier having his own uniform (Snippos, 2012, p. 33). The Numidians participated heavily in the Carthaginian army after Carthage changed its foreign policy based on subjugating the local population. The Numidians formed large cavalry and infantry divisions, and Carthage sent them on special missions because of their mobility. The Numidians were also present in the First Punic War (264-241 BC), in which the Carthaginians lost about ten thousand soldiers from the local population. The alliance between the Numidians and Carthage continued until the end of the third century BC during the reign of Masinissa and Syphax, who changed their alliance between Rome and Carthage according to their respective political and military circumstances (Bouroina, 1999, p. 194).

Numidia was also known for its cavalry, which outnumbered its infantry (Harsh, Ancient Maghreb History, 1992, p. 19), whose horsemen rode short, fast horses suitable for scouting the enemy and carrying out quick, sudden raids. The Numidian horseman wore light clothing and carried light weapons, holding a wooden stick in his hand. Numidian horsemen were renowned for the strength of their horses, which were short and fast against enemies and suitable for reconnaissance. Another distinctive feature of Numidian horsemen was that they rode their horses without saddles or bridles. Evidence of their skill in horse training and breeding is that it was available to everyone, unlike the Romans, where it was only available to the upper class.

The Numidian cavalry fought alongside the Carthaginian army against their most important enemies, the Greeks and Romans. Among the battles fought by the Numidians that had a significant impact were the wars fought by Hannibal against the Romans, who suffered one defeat after another, most notably the wars fought by the Carthaginian army in Spain. Many historians confirm that Thalesius that the armies that fought for Carthage were mostly composed of Numidians, especially in the Second Punic War led by the Carthaginian commander Hannibal (Ghanem, Resistance and Military History in the Maghreb, 2007, p. 281).

Although the Numidian cavalry was considered one of the most important and renowned battalions of the time, this did not diminish the importance of the trained and disciplined infantry. The Numidian leaders used to make agreements with the tribes to obtain the necessary units and recruit them in wars or join the regular Numidian forces to make agreements with major countries such as Rome and Carthage, especially the Carthaginians, who recruited the Numidians as their main force. However, delays in paying their wages led them to stage multiple revolts, most of which failed, and prompted them to ally with Rome against Carthage and form an alliance among themselves to take revenge on Carthage for its policy towards the Numidians.

#### **5. Structure of the Numidian military organisation:**

The Numidians had several military formations throughout their history, like most of the ancient armies of their time, including land and naval forces. Researcher Mohamed El Hadi Harish divided the land army into three categories: the standing army, which the Numidians relied on heavily in their wars, and which most historians divided into two divisions, the infantry and the cavalry. The former was distinguished by its large numbers and strength, and some researchers divided it into two sections: light and heavy. The cavalry, on the other hand, gained fame, and the Numidians preserved it as a symbol of strength and courage. The Numidian cavalry can be divided into two types: light and heavy

(Akseil, 2007, p. 267). The remaining two types represent the reserve army and mercenaries (Harish, Kingdom of Numidia, 2013, p. 76). As for the navy, the Numidians did not pay much attention to it before the fall of Carthage in 146 BC, after Masinissa took control of some of its military ports.

### **5.1 Numidian army equipment:**

The Numidian army used various military equipment to protect itself from enemy attacks, including clothing and weapons. Their clothing was made of shaved goatskin and decorated with coloured strips, often red. Fighters wore masks to protect themselves from the elements. Strabo mentions that 'the Libyans wear loose clothing made of animal skins' (Strabon, 1867, pp. XVII, 3,7). As for the weapons used by the Numidians, they can be divided into two categories:

First: offensive weapons, which the Numidians were highly skilled in using and employed in various forms depending on the need and nature of the enemy. In the early period, they used arrowheads, sharp convex stones, and sticks of various kinds. The Numidians also relied heavily on the physical strength of their fighters and used catapults. The development of offensive weapons continued until the manufacture of various bronze and iron weapons, as mentioned in several historical sources and archaeological sites in Algeria. Among these offensive weapons, we mention the types that the Numidians relied on in their wars and which some historians called their national weapon, such as spears, which were found in large numbers at archaeological sites, indicating their frequent use by the local population (Harish, Ancient Maghreb History, 1992, p. 126). Alongside the spear, we always find the sword, which the Numidians used in their wars since ancient times and which may date back to the Pharaohs, as mentioned in their historical sources on their wars with the inhabitants of North Africa (Aqoun, 2004, p. 90). Among the other weapons relied upon by the local inhabitants and all ancient armies were bows and arrows, which were popular at the time and used by humans in various fields, including hunting, warfare and recreation. Historians mention that the Libyans were

skilled in the use of bows and arrows and used them before the Battle of Himera (480 BC). The Numidians also used other offensive weapons in certain battles, such as daggers and short swords when engaging with enemies and fleeing from battles to cut their veins and those of their horses (Harish, Ancient Maghreb History, 1992, p. 127).

Second: Defensive weapons, many remains of which have been found in ancient Morocco, include some that were primary and others that can be considered secondary. Among the primary weapons, we find the shield, which is widespread in rock drawings and archaeological sites in ancient Morocco, to the extent that most researchers consider it the national weapon of the Numidians, as it has been used since ancient times by cavalry and infantry due to its light weight (Authors, 2015, p. 129). Herodotus also mentions that the Numidians used armour made of elephant skin in warfare (Al-Mallah, 2001, p. 396).

### **5.2 Animals used by the Numidians in warfare:**

The Numidians limited themselves to a group of animals that were suited to the region and used by the local population in their daily lives. Among these was the Numidian horse, which was strong, fast and capable of walking long distances. It has been mentioned by the local population since ancient times and was used in wars and to pull carts. It appeared on the coins of the Numidian kings, indicating the status enjoyed by this Charles Snippus mentions that the Numidians rode fast, short, and strong horses and shot bows while their horses galloped (Kurd, 2012, p. 33). As for the elephant, it comes second after horses. The Libyan elephant is characterised by its resistance to heat and its patience in enduring thirst. It is also characterised by its short stature and strength. The Numidians used elephants as a strategic weapon in major battles, and they did not know this weapon before the Punic Wars. They also appear in rock paintings in North Africa and were of great importance in deciding the outcome of battles. From a psychological point of view, they gave the fighters an extra boost of morale to face their enemies (Bashi, 2011).

### **5.3 Military tactics of the Numidians:**

Like other armies before them, the Numidians were characterised by military tactics imported from their neighbours through contact with them and participation in their armies in various forms, such as alliances with major powers such as Carthage and Rome, serving as mercenaries in their armies and in their own armies. Among these tactics was direct confrontation with the enemy, a tactic known for its use by the resistance leader Jugurtha and King Juba I, and the clash between Masinissa and Carthage in the Great Battle of the Steppes in 150 BC (Harsh, *Political and Economic Development in Numidia*, 1995). The Numidians also employed another tactic in their military strategy, namely military alliances with major powers. They changed the course of wars and battles and influenced their outcome, which altered the political and military reality of ancient Morocco. The Numidians, especially in their wars with the Romans, relied on guerrilla warfare, which they specialised in and which exhausted the Roman state in several battles. Among those and those who excelled in this revolutionary style were Jugurtha and, due to his great cunning, even Mithridates said of him, quoting Sallust, 'Jugurtha is a fighter to be wary of, whether present or absent, attacking or peaceful' (Chrysos, 1997, p. 67). The Numidians also excelled in other tactics such as psychological warfare, trickery, deception, ambushes, skirmishes and manoeuvres (Chrysos, 1997, p. 57).

### **6. The military position of the Numidians in the First Punic War (264-241 BC):**

Although Carthage had no expansionist ambitions, from the 5th century BC onwards, a change in its policy emerged as a result of its loss of influence in Sicily and the decline of its commercial activity. Carthage had to build a strong army that would enable it to preserve its internal and external interests and control the global trade routes of the time, especially the sea routes of the Mediterranean, especially after the clash with the Greeks and the decline of its position as a world power and the emergence of Rome as a new military power,

which brought it face to face with the Carthaginian state (Al-Mahasin, 1981, p. 85). Control of the trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea and the island of Sicily enabled control of global trade at that time, which precipitated the clash between Rome and Carthage, as evidenced by the First Punic War (264-241 BC). The initial causes can be traced back to a rebellion in the city of Messina on the island of Sicily against the Carthaginians, but the Carthaginians quickly remedied the situation and managed to capture the commander of the garrison and take him hostage, prompting the people of Messina to seek help from Rome, which rushed to their aid, taking advantage of the situation on the island, seeking their support. This led to the outbreak of war between the two countries (Al-Mahasin, 1981, p. 86). The war took the form of hit-and-run battles between the two sides. The Roman army was led by Matellus and the commander Riculius, while the Carthaginian army was led by the commanders Hanno and Hamilcar. Rome achieved victories in naval battles and subsequently entered Africa. Among the reasons that led to Carthage's defeat in the First Punic War was Carthage's treatment of the Numidian volunteers in some situations, as well as the delay in paying them their wages, which angered them and motivated them to protest against the defeated Carthage. The situation with their Roman neighbours worsened (Al-Mahasin, 1981, p. 86).

### **7. The mercenary revolt after the end of the First Punic War:**

The end of the First Punic War was marked by unrest, problems and wars for Carthage. The peace treaty concluded in 241 BC did not bring peace to Carthage, but rather led to another war, as many mercenaries rose up to demand that Carthage pay them their wages, provide them with wheat, and compensate them for the horses they had lost in the wars (Akseil, 2007, p. 96).

The mercenary war broke out in 241 BC and turned from a rebellion and revolt in its early stages into a political and social revolution aimed at liberation from Carthaginian domination. Indications suggest that all

segments of society participated in the war, . It lasted three years and almost led to the fall of Carthage, which recruited everyone in the city who could bear arms, called on the mercenaries present there, formed cavalry regiments, and equipped the ships that were still available (Ghanem, *Essays on the Ancient History of Algeria*, 2005, p. 109). It also requested aid from the Greek king Heron of Syracuse, who responded to Carthage's request, but Rome intervened, fearing that the two sides would come closer together at the expense of its interests. Rome also provided support to the Carthaginian army to embroil it in side wars. Many of the leaders of this rebellion emerged from among the mercenaries, the most important of whom was Mathos, who relied on his cunning and deliberately negotiated with each ethnic group separately, succeeding in persuading the majority of them, as well as other leaders who had fought with the Carthaginians in their previous wars. Matos approached the local population and told them that Carthage wanted to pay the foreigners or foreign groups without them, punish them, and make them pay for the collective rebellion. Matos exploited this incitement against Carthage, and as a result, chaos began to spread in Carthage and the reasons for its downfall increased. Meanwhile, Carthage sent an envoy to Mathos, as its leader, to end the rebellion. Mathos captured and insulted the envoy, which Carthage considered a declaration of war. Carthage made every effort to quell the rebellion that threatened its existence, leading to open warfare between the two sides. Carthage recruited everyone in the city who could bear arms and called on mercenaries from Gaul and Spain for help. It also received reinforcements from Rome in order to strengthen the conflict between Carthage and the Numidians (Ghanem, *Articles on the Ancient History of Algeria*, 2005, p. 110).

The Carthaginian commander Hanno attempted to storm the rebels' camp and almost succeeded. Faced with this surprise attack, Mathos withdrew his forces to the top of the hill, but it was not large enough to accommodate all his soldiers, so some of them

scattered in the neighbouring plains. The Carthaginian commander Hanno believed he had won and retreated to the city, and the soldiers saw no harm in laying down their arms. Meanwhile, Mathos launched a surprise attack on Hannon's camp and defeated him, which led to his punishment by the Carthaginian leadership and his removal from his duties. They appointed the veteran military commander Hamilcar, who was an expert in military affairs and had extensive combat experience. Hamilcar assembled a powerful army and used his military experience and cunning, initially employing psychological warfare against the locals to win them over and gain their support. He promised not to punish anyone who laid down their arms or joined him, and with this slogan, Hamilcar caused divisions among the Numidians. A senior commander named Barawas joined him and managed to win over a hundred horsemen from Mathos' army. This was one of the reasons why Commander Hamilcar defeated the rebels. The battle left thousands dead and Mathos was executed on the battlefield. With this decisive victory, Carthage was able to launch extensive recruitment campaigns in Africa among the Libyans and Numidians, who participated in Carthage's wars outside the African continent (Ghanem, *Articles on the Ancient History of Algeria*, 2005, pp. 111-112, 113). 8. Military contributions of the Numidians in the Second Punic War (218-202 BC):

After the peace treaty between Carthage and Rome was revoked, each side was free to act as it saw fit, given that peaceful efforts had failed. Each country had to prepare for war, known as the Second Punic War, which took place in several theatres, unlike the First Punic War, which was confined to the island of Sicily. The reason for the war was the entry of the Carthaginian commander Hannibal into the Spanish city of Saguntum in 219 BC, which was one of the terms of the agreement between Hasdrubal and the Romans that placed the city under Roman protection (Ducray, 1994).

The Second Punic War saw extensive participation by the Numidians, who were an important part of the Carthaginian army that went to Spain to protect it, led by Hasdrubal,

Hannibal's brother. The origins of his ancestors are mentioned in the Lachiun inscription in Italy. The Libyan infantry formed the backbone of the Carthaginian forces sent to Spain. These divisions, consisting of infantry and cavalry, were equipped, trained and armed with maces and other types of weapons familiar to the local population. Ghazal mentions in his commentary that the army led by Hannibal from Africa was the same one with which he conquered Lada Galla and Italy, and included many Numidians in its ranks (Aksil, 2007, p. 135).

Classical sources mention the strength of the Numidian soldiers, describing their high military capabilities. The Romans were wary of the Numidian cavalry, especially when news of them spread during the battles Hannibal led in the Italian peninsula. The Numidians' horsemanship skills stemmed from the fact that it was part of their daily life, unlike the Romans, where only the wealthy practised horsemanship. Polysus mentions that the number of Africans in Hannibal's army in Spain was about 14,000 infantrymen and 2,000 cavalrymen, who were a mixture of Libyans, Numidians and Moors. Hannibal achieved great victories, most notably the Battle of Cannae, thanks to the strength of his winged cavalry. When Hannibal requested assistance from Carthage, thousands of African recruits were sent to him, including Numidians, who played a decisive role in the battles. Titus Livius mentions the course of the Battle of Cannae and the prominent role played by the Numidians in this battle, saying 'The Numidians fought in a unique way in the battle of Cannae, different from the rest of the warriors, as they did not place their defensive shields behind their backs' (Tite-Live, 1949, pp. xxII 48.2-). As a result, Rome recognised the status and power of the Numidians and their influence in the ongoing wars between Rome and Carthage, and sought to form an alliance with them. To this end, it made several attempts to persuade and incite them against the Carthaginians and held several meetings with them in order to win their favour. After the balance of power shifted in favour of the Romans following Hannibal's defeat in Gaul

and the Italian peninsula, Masinissa the Numidian switched from being an ally of Carthage to a supporter of the Romans, whom he saw as having the power to help him regain his kingdom, which he had lost to Sfax and the Carthaginians. Masinissa continued to support the Romans in ancient Morocco, contributing to their victories and playing a role in burning the Carthaginian and western Numidian camps (Farhati, 2007, p. 75).

All sources agree that Masinissa played a decisive role in the Battle of Zama (202 BC), where Scipio informed Masinissa of all military operations. and the latter provided him with all the information about ancient Morocco and the strengths and weaknesses of the Carthaginians and their Numidian ally, Sfax. He also participated actively in battles, including the decisive Battle of Zama, where he participated with 6,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry. The alliance between the Numidians and the Romans continued until the end of the Second Punic War, and they helped Masinissa recover his ancestors' lands from the Carthaginians. The Numidian king Masinissa also supported the Romans in their wars in the East and in their wars against the Legurians and in the Iberian Peninsula (Farhati, 2007, p. 77).

## **9. Conclusion:**

The Numidians played an important military role in the First Punic War by participating in the Carthaginian armies. At the end of this war, they joined forces with mercenary soldiers in a rebellion against Carthage that nearly destroyed it. With the emergence of national kingdoms as a third force in the eastern and western Mediterranean basin, Western Numidia, led by King Syphax during the Second Punic War, emerged as a seasoned statesman who would play an important political and military role in the region, thanks to its geographical location (now Algeria) and the strength of his army. Rome and Carthage realised this and competed to form an alliance with him, offering him gifts and presents to win his favour and hold international meetings with him. This was evident at the conference of Siga in 206 BC, which brought together all the conflicting parties.

As for the Kingdom of Masylia (Eastern Numidia), which covered eastern Algeria and parts of Tunisia, it emerged under the leadership of King Gaia, who fought Carthage and then allied with it and sent his son Masinissa at the head of a military division to fight the Romans. After the conflict over the Massilian throne, political positions and alliances changed, and Masinissa turned from an ally to an enemy of Carthage and its allies after they worked to remove him from the Massilian throne and marry his fiancée, the Carthaginian princess, to Mencasus.

The Carthaginian and Roman empires entered the Second Punic War, and the Numidians joined them as a third force. They played a prominent military role in the course of the battles and were divided between the two states: Masinissa was an ally of the Romans and Syphax was an ally of Carthage. The Numidians demonstrated their military strength and changed the balance of power in the Mediterranean basin. .

With the end of the Second Punic War, the elimination of King Syphax, and the decline of Carthage, King Masinissa became the ruler of Numidia and began to build the foundations of the state with all its political, social, and economic elements. He turned towards the east in what he considered to be a recovery of his ancestors' land from Carthage and entered into wars with it until he almost defeated it, had it not been for the intervention of the Romans and their declaration of war on Carthage, which was called the Third Punic War 149-146 BC for fear of Masinissa's power spreading over the entire ancient Maghreb.

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